

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **1, PART I**

LOS ANGELES TIMES
5 August 1985

Smuggler Tried to Sell Nuclear Triggers in 'Peace Plan'

Iranian Claims He Offered Arms to Iraq

By WILLIAM C. REMPEL and RALPH FRAMMOLINO, *Times Staff Writers*

SAN DIEGO—A convicted Iranian weapons smuggler and his Iranian partner in London offered to sell nuclear trigger devices called krytrons to Iraq as part of a bizarre so-called "peace plan" to end the war between Tehran and Baghdad, according to court records and interviews with investigators.

San Diego delicatessen owner Yasser Abdulrahman (Max) Shooshtary, who pleaded guilty here in May to charges of conspiracy to sell restricted radar equipment to Iran, met with Iraqi intelligence agents and others at Iraqi embassies in London and New York to negotiate the sale of krytron devices, the records show.

Authorities doubt that Shooshtary and his partner had access to—and that the Iraqi military now possesses—nuclear weapons. The case illustrates, however, the brazen and mercenary methods of those dealing in weapons on the international black market, an underground arms bazaar that federal indictments charge has lured would-be profiteers from inside the Pentagon, the U.S. military supply system and American business.

The Times revealed details on Sunday of how Iran operates as a major trader in that black market, mounting a multibillion-dollar

clandestine campaign to acquire the American-made weapons and military supplies—often regardless of price—that it needs to support its war against Iraq. Hundreds of Iranian agents and their collaborators, among them Shooshtary, are engaged in the effort to circumvent a U.S. arms embargo, The Times reported.

For Shooshtary and others attracted by the promise of substantial black market profits, the bitter Mideast conflict represents a potentially lucrative opportunity, regardless of their national loyalty.

To an undercover U.S. Customs Service agent—posing as a fellow smuggler—Shooshtary bluntly declared: "We want to make some money." And in subsequent conversations secretly recorded by the agent, Shooshtary said that "there are 2,000 people like us trying to get some money" from the Iranian government.

Investigators also discovered that Shooshtary and Amir Mansour, his London partner, were attempting to "get some money" from deals with the Iraqi government as well. Their primary product: a key component of an atomic bomb.

"The (krytron) triggering device is a complex instrument; it's the guts of an atomic bomb," a federal investigator said. "If a country's got these, it's relatively easy to get the bomb."

According to technical experts, the krytron is a high-speed electronic switch that can be used to control the timing of a nuclear detonation. The more precise the timing, the more destructive the explosion can be.

"You don't have to sell a whole bomb out of the back of your truck to be selling something very dangerous," the investigator said.

Earlier this year federal agents arrested a man they identified as a Pakistani agent who was accused of trying to smuggle 50 krytrons out of the United States. In May a Huntington Beach man was indicted on charges that he illegally exported triggering devices to Israel.

Neither Shooshtary nor Mansour was charged with a criminal violation in connection with the krytron negotiations and, after the San Diego man's arrest on unrelated smuggling charges, he insisted that the attempted sale of nuclear trig-

ger devices was intended to help resolve the Iran-Iraq war.

His attorney called it "a peace plan to stop the war."

"One of the foundations for this plan was one of the two countries having the possibility of nuclear weapons . . . would frighten the other country and stop the war," defense attorney Warren Williamson told a federal judge before Shooshtary was sentenced to a year in prison.

A U.S. State Department official called the claim "absolutely ridiculous."

Lynne Lasry, assistant U.S. attorney here asked: "Do you know

what his peace plan was? The highest bidder gets the bomb." She called Shooshtary a man with "no loyalty to anything."

"He tells us how he's a Christian, how he's anti-Khomeini, how his wife's people have been persecuted; and this is the same person who is supplying weapons to the Khomeini government for money.

"It's the same person who would deal with the Iraqi government to (sell) an atomic weapon . . . purportedly to blow up Iran. It makes no sense," she argued in court.

Shooshtary, 49, a resident alien with dual citizenship in Iran and Great Britain, pleaded guilty to the export violation conspiracy charges, avoiding a trial that would have featured extensive use of surreptitiously tape-recorded conversations.

Transcripts of those conversations, obtained by The Times, provide revealing glimpses not only into Iran's supply dilemma but also into the attitude of smugglers-for-hire like Shooshtary.

Iran 'in a Bind'

During a meeting with the undercover agent on June 21, 1984, in Chula Vista, for example, Shooshtary said that the most important thing to do was to convince the Iranians that they could count on delivery of the radar equipment and that then "we are in the money."

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He explained that Iran "is in a bind" because of its war with Iraq but that it does not always trust the people it must deal with for American equipment.

"They think everyone is trying to bite them," Shooshtary said.

Nonetheless, he said, Iran insists on buying primarily American military equipment because "you have the better quality, you know?" he added: "These people are fanatics. They (even) want American police motorcycles."

Citing conversations he said he had had with Iranian procurement officials in London, Shooshtary said that Iran is shopping for "parts from motorcycles, from gunships, (they want) helicopters,

planes, accessories, anything we can get. . . computers. . ."

He said Iran takes pleasure in circumventing the U.S. arms embargo. "They feel big by that, you know?" He said that among Iranian officials involved in the campaign to acquire American-made goods there is a joke that Americans "(would) sell their wives for money."

Noting the irony that America is regarded as "the great Satan" by Iranian leaders, Shooshtary also said: "They (Iranians) get everything from Satan. . . . They are idiots."

Iran never received the radar equipment Shooshtary negotiated to supply, however. When he was arrested, a federal indictment also named four others, including an Iranian citizen and a British businessman, both living in London, who remain fugitives.

Assistant U.S. Atty. Lasry said Shooshtary and his fellow conspirators committed "offenses that can affect the national security of the United States and of the world."

Williamson, however, called his client "a gentle man" and said Shooshtary was unfairly characterized as "the cackling evil person laughing at someone else's fear of weapons."

Court documents show that Shooshtary, in an apparent effort to impress his confederates, went so far as to claim that he even had tried to enlist an American congressman to help obtain sophisticated radar equipment for the Iranian military, a claim later dis-

counted by federal investigators.

In a court order setting Shooshtary's bail at \$1.5 million, U.S. Magistrate Edward A. Infante noted that when he was questioned, the sandwich shop operator "stated that he had met with a congressman for the purchase of the radar tubes but that the congressman had required too much money."

A spokesman for the U.S. Justice Department, which investigated the case, called Shooshtary's claim "more braggadocio than fact." Williamson told The Times that Shooshtary never dealt directly with any congressman.

Exports Discussed

"My client had a conversation with a guy in Los Angeles who said he knew a congressman who could help with Iranian exports," Williamson said. When asked if those conversations involved plans to smuggle radar components, the attorney said that they involved "exports—period."

Shooshtary is scheduled to appear in U.S. District Court here today to request reduction of his one-year prison sentence. Meanwhile, his application for U.S. citizenship is pending with the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Federal authorities said they will recommend deportation after he is released from prison. Shooshtary declined requests by The Times for an interview.

William C. Rempel reported from Washington and Ralph Frammolino from San Diego.